

Letter to the Editors

Every now and again a review pops up that is worth comment. Professor Glyn Harper's on *Passchendaele: The Anatomy of a Tragedy* is one such.

The book is actually about tactical effectiveness in the context of Third Ypres, 1917, with a particular focus on the October battles. Discussion centres on II Anzac, a corps-level formation in the British army, as opposed to the British Expeditionary Force. It also focuses on the New Zealand Division, with extensive reference to Australian, British and Canadian formations, and German ones, too.

Harper makes a number of favourable comments for which I am grateful, and that my thesis remains unchallenged after a several-hundred-word nibbling is pleasing also.

There is no need for me to dwell on the numerous factual errors perpetuated by other authors and corrected by *Passchendaele*, or of the massive amount of objective, fresh research and primary material brought to print for the first time.

Two points are salient, however.

In essence Harper takes issue with the semantics of published argument over its actual substance, apparently forgetting his New Zealand-centric monograph is the emotively titled *Massacre at Passchendaele*.

He also asserts ultimate responsibility for New Zealand's worst-ever military disaster – the Battle of First Passchendaele, on 12 October 1917 – rests with British army commander Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and 'not a loyal corps commander trying to implement his impossible orders'. That commander was Lieutenant-General Sir Alexander Godley, at the helm of II Anzac.

This Nuremberg defence for Godley is quite some distance off the pace. Even in the broader context of World War One it is too simplistic and general an apology for tactical-level command and control failings, and specifically so at Passchendaele, as my book repeatedly shows.

Command diagrams and military manuals will tell you one thing; the reality of command often quite another, as history repeatedly reveals. Then, as now, it is difficult to legislate against personality and character.

Don't take my word for it; you don't have to. The examination of such human factors in Haig's subordinates is an increasingly hot topic among those at the cutting edge of World War One military history.

Professor Gary Sheffield, University of Wolverhampton, by turns suggests the comparative study of corps, division and brigade commanders according to a variety of criteria that include career, experience, command technique, performance and the human factor.¹

At the end of the day Harper's words boil down to opinion wrapped in the algorithm of review (something good, something bad, *und so weiter*).

Why not read Harper's *Massacre* and my *Passchendaele* and form your own conclusions?

All the best

Andy Macdonald, author, London

¹ Gary Sheffield, *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914–18*, Stroud, 2007, pp.9–10.